Socialism and the fight against the pandemic

Labor Notes covers up role of AFT, Democratic Party in betrayal of U of M grad instructors strike

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On September 30, Labor Notes held an online meeting titled, "No Cuts, No Cops, No Union Busting: Organizing for Power in Public Higher Education." Representatives from several campuses gave reports on union organizing experiences, but the focus of the event was last month's nine-day graduate student instructors strike at the University of Michigan.

The central aim of the event's organizers was to cover up the critical political issues raised by the U of M grad students walkout and its betrayal at the hands of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), which worked closely with the Democratic Party and employed racial politics to divide and disorient the strikers.

University of Michigan graduate student instructors went on strike on September 8 in response to the reckless reopening of the university and the initiation of in-person classes in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The students, organized in the Graduate Employees Organization (GEO), an affiliate of the AFT, demanded a universal and unconditional right to work and teach remotely. They also called for additional personal protective equipment (PPE), increased COVID-19 testing, and an extension of funding and program timelines to take into account the disruption caused by the pandemic.

The GEO also called for the defunding of the university police department, the demilitarization of the campus, and the severing of ties with law enforcement agencies, such as Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE).

The militant and principled strike in opposition to the back-to-work and back-to-school drive of the corporate-financial elite elicited powerful support on the campus and across the country. Though initially called as a four-day walkout, the membership voted to extend the strike after rejecting a sellout contract that had been recommended by the GEO president.

At that point, the university went to court to file for an injunction against the strike, and the AFT bureaucracy stepped in, took over the negotiations and quickly shut down the strike. It rammed through a ratification vote on a contract offer that rejected the key demands against mandatory in-person instruction and for proper precautions against the pandemic. The AFT, an adjunct of the Democratic Party, which controls the Michigan governorship, made use of racial politics advanced by a section of the grad students to sow division and confusion among the strikers.

In challenging the back-to-work and back-to-school policy of the university, the grad students entered into what was not simply a trade union but a political struggle. The strike broke out in the midst of the drive by the Trump administration and Democratic governors and mayors across the country to reopen the schools and universities. This was seen by the ruling class as an essential part of the campaign to force workers to return to work and resume producing profits for the corporations, despite the lack of any serious safeguards against the deadly virus.

The immediate result of the initial school and campus reopenings had been eruptions of the disease and a wave of protests by teachers against the resumption of in-person instruction. Spearheaded by the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site*, teachers in cities across the country had begun to establish rank-and-file safety committees independent of the teachers unions, which are backing the reopening drive, and the Democratic Party.

The U of M strike thus posed a serious threat to the policy of the ruling class and both of its political parties. From their standpoint, it had to be crushed lest it inspire a far broader movement of the working class against the homicidal response of the ruling elite to the pandemic. For the Democratic Party, in particular, the strike was a danger because it threatened to expose their complicity in Trump's "herd immunity" policy in the run-up to the November election.

Since the sellout of the GEO strike, the university has expanded its reopening policy. The result has been new outbreaks of the coronavirus in student dorms. Just in the past week the university has moved to reopen school dining halls for

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indoor service, triggering opposition from dining hall workers.

The Labor Notes event was an effort to whitewash the treacherous role of the AFT bureaucracy, cover up the pro-corporate role of the Democratic Party, and bury the fundamental political issues, in the first instance to channel anti-Trump opposition behind the right-wing Democratic Party Biden-Harris campaign.

Labor Notes has a long history of deflecting working class opposition to the trade union bureaucracy, serving as the bureaucracy's "left" flank and keeping leftward moving workers trapped in these pro-capitalist organizations, which work actively for the defeat of the workers they claim to represent.

In the case of the GEO strike and its sellout, this required a falsification of the facts and the promotion of outright lies.

The Labor Notes event lied about the major demands of the strike.

According to the presentation at the event, the strike was primarily about racist university policing. It was, as a GEO officer who spoke at the Labor Notes meeting put it, "an abolitionist strike." But while racism and police violence were concerns of the grad students, they were not the central issues in the walkout. The central issue was mandatory in-person instruction—a class, not a racial, demand.

At the general membership meeting that discussed whether the initial offer should be accepted, most of those who spoke against it focused on its failure to address any of the demands related to the health, safety and economic security of the graduate students. This is the central reason why this offer was overwhelmingly rejected by the membership, not because the university "explicitly did not address policing," as was claimed at the Labor Notes event.

The promotion of racialist politics was stepped up in the second week of the strike, when the AFT intervened to smother it, and was given assistance by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). This was also when the term "abolitionist strike" began to be heavily promoted and used by a layer of the student instructors. As the *World Socialist Web Site* analyzed in the Lessons of the University of Michigan graduate student strike:

"[T]here was a deliberate and pernicious effort by a layer of students within the GEO to employ racialist politics against those who wanted to defend and expand the strike."

The Labor Notes event also made the lying claim that the AFT had strengthened the strikers.

In their report to the meeting, two GEO officers stated, "We have the support of AFT, which makes the strike portion of this a little more streamlined and have a little more support going into it than we would have if we were not affiliated."

Far from supporting the strike, the AFT was hostile to it from the very beginning. It worked to isolate the walkout. Neither the national nor the Michigan AFT leadership even acknowledged the strike's existence until the GEO members voted down the initial offer from the university and then voted to extend the walkout. Only then did Michigan Federation of Teachers leader David Hecker offer a few perfunctory words of support during a virtual Michigan town hall with Bernie Sanders and other Democrats.

Neither before nor after the university threatened legal action against the GEO strikers did the AFT mobilize its two other unions on campus—the Lecturers Employees' Organization (LEO) and University Physician Assistants at Michigan Medicine (UPAMM)—to defend the graduate students. Nor did it mobilize any of its other 90 affiliated unions across the state, many of which were facing similarly dangerous working conditions at K-12 schools and on college campuses.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE), the youth organization of the Socialist Equality Party, advanced policies in the strike based on an understanding of the fundamental political and class issues underlying the struggle. The IYSSE explained that the fight against the pandemic was a fight against the policy of the ruling oligarchy to exploit the massive health crisis to protect and expand its wealth, no matter the cost in the lives, jobs and living standards of the working masses.

This basic response to the pandemic was common to both parties. Hence the passage of the CARES Act, which funneled trillions to big business, and the failure to pass any new relief measures under conditions of a social catastrophe engulfing tens of millions of workers and young people. The murderous policy of the ruling class has been recorded in the explosive rise in infections and deaths alongside a record rise in the stock market and the wealth of Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk and company.

Thus, the fight to contain and end the pandemic and save lives was in essence a fight against the capitalist system. It could be carried through only by mobilizing the working class in the struggle for socialism.

On this basis, the IYSSE called for the formation of a campus-wide strike committee independent of the AFT and the Democratic Party to spread the strike to all sections of U of M workers and broaden the struggle to include autoworkers, Amazon workers, teachers and every section of workers and youth.

These are the vital political issues that Labor Notes and the AFT seek to bury in order to block the development of a genuine movement of the working class for socialism.

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